

The Correctional Trainer



March 2020



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Are We Training Our Staff to Fail: Revisioning Staff Training

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Introduction

Staff orientation and inservice training have greatly improved in recent years; eLearning and cognitive behavior intervention training have been an important part of this. Yet, we are still experiencing a crippling situation with high turnover and staff burnout. Staff report leaving their positions mainly because of issues with other staff, poor supervisors and a feeling management cares more about filling positions than about staff well-being¹. All three of these are the result of poor relationships, and the quality of these relationships is a key factor in the quality of the work culture. It is said that staff do not leave organizations, they leave their supervisors.² When relationships improve, staff retention improves, and relationships are impacted by people skills, which are called “soft skills.” Daniel Goleman, in his book “Emotional Intelligence”³ calls these soft skills “emotional intelligence” and this may be a critical factor in reducing turnover, i.e., teaching our staff emotional intelligence skills or raising what is called their EQ, which is the emotional intelligence equivalent of IQ. We are in the people business⁴, so emotional intelligence skills are critical, and we don’t do well in teaching these skills. The question must now be asked, are we training our staff in all the areas necessary to be successful, or are we training them to fail?

Staff Training Design

Our staff training design came from the military and how they train. The purpose of military training is to breakdown the recruits’ self-esteem and resocialize them into a new way of thinking, i.e., an “us vs. them” mentality where the “them” is the enemy and must be killed. When they do come in daily contact with and are supervising the enemy, they may abuse them as we saw what happened at Abu Grab. The question must be asked if this method is also appropriate for work in corrections where the goal is security and rehabilitation. In a FBI report on recruit training, it states that classic stress training has proven to be not only ineffective, but to actually be counterproductive. Because this type of training undermines and damages self-esteem, it results in low motivation and poor performance, and is one of the primary reasons for attrition of adult learners. What benefits it shows are short lived. When DOC recruits leave the training academy and the fear induced by the instructors is gone, performance deteriorates due to the continuing low self-esteem and motivation.⁵

Traditionally, training instructors were “trained to grab trainees’ attention by letting them know that the instructors were in charge, and if trainees did not conform quickly to the routine, more discipline problems would occur. This type of interaction between instructors and trainees is no longer effective and creates unnecessary stress for trainees.”⁶ Moreover, it is less effective with the younger [post-baby boomers] generations, who do not accept the ‘do as I say’ approach that older generations did.^{7,8} In a recent study of a DOC training academy’s curriculum, one of the major recommendations was to “replace elements of the paramilitary methodology with adult-learning principles and learning techniques conducive to an educational environment.”⁹ Of those recruits who quit training, many cited the para-military approach as the primary reason.¹⁰ The study also stated that “the paramilitary training methods of the past are obviously disconnected from the public and community service missions of law-enforcement agencies today.”¹¹

In 2011 [updated in 2018], the National Institute of Corrections published the ITIP [Instructional Theory Into Practice] Toolkit; A Guide for Working with Curriculum Developers. This is a significant step forward

in transitioning from the classic stress training model to the adult learning model. It actively engages participants in the training process, is more experiential and is more learner focused rather than just content driven. Some DOCs, like Wyoming are using this model with great effectiveness.

Training Content

It is not only important to address the teaching methods of training, but also the content of what is being taught to new recruits. Since relationships are key to staff retention, training needs to cover teamwork skills, work culture and communications among staff. All too often, teamwork is not directly covered, work culture is almost never covered and communication skills are usually covered in interpersonal communication [IPC], which normally deals with staff-inmate communications. Topics normally included are: inmate management, officer safety, security, practical skills, history and development of corrections, ethics and professionalism, criminal justice systems, laws, rights, investigations and special populations.¹² None of these deals with emotional intelligence, which includes: self-awareness; managing emotions; motivating self and emotional self-control; recognizing emotions in others [empathy]; social awareness; and developing and managing relationships. These skills are key to cooperation, teambuilding, supervision and leadership, which are key to developing a healthy work culture, and as the NIC Resource Guide for Newly Appointed Wardens states, “Do not underestimate culture; it drives everything.”¹³ For many professions, these skills are not necessary, but they are critical in corrections where relationships can turn a problem situation into a dangerous crisis. Emotional intelligence skills need to be taught to the younger recruits who are addicted to social media, but also to the older staff who are socialized into the paramilitary culture.

Since one of the goals of corrections is to “correct” or rehabilitate, this should be an area that receives considerable emphasis in staff orientation and inservice training.¹⁴ With all the day-to-day contact correctional officers have with inmates, they are in a prime position to play a meaningful role in rehabilitation. It is disappointing that a study of 43 state correctional agencies found that only 58% of agencies covered rehabilitation with an average of 3.83 hours and 44% taught cognitive-behavioral interventions for an average of only 3.24 hours.¹⁵ This is especially significant because staff being involved in the rehabilitation or behavior change process gives staff more meaning to their jobs and thus, greater job satisfaction, which clearly is linked to staff retention. A 2018 report on turnover in the Maryland DOC recommended staff training programs designed to shift correctional officer ideology from punitive to restorative/rehabilitative,¹⁶ and therefore, “training academies should include extensive training in rehabilitative tasks and skills.”¹⁷ Viewing correctional officers’ job as a human service profession would help build officer professionalism.¹⁸ Further, when inmates have access to effective rehabilitation programs, the staff’s fear of victimization can be greatly reduced, thus reducing their stress level.¹⁹

Supervisor Training

Arguably, the most important training area for relationships is the preparation and ongoing training of supervisors, who are key to staff job satisfaction. “When it comes to employee retention, there is no one more influential than the immediate supervisor.”²⁰ Good supervisors, “even in bad organizations, have a greater probability of keeping workers happy, productive, and on the job.”²¹ “The impact of supervisors goes beyond establishing effective interpersonal communications. That is necessary, but it is not sufficient. Good supervisors have rapport with and praise for their staff. Even more importantly, they care about their employees and strive to meet their needs. This is especially critical for today’s new employees – who are not as likely as their older predecessors to tolerate “assembly line” treatment where workers are viewed as replaceable parts in a bureaucratic machine.”²² “Ninety-five percent of the reasons people leave are preventable. Of that 95%, more than 70% of the reasons are related to factors that are controllable by the direct supervisor.”²³ One of those factors is empowerment, that supervisors replace supervisor control with self-control.²⁴

All too frequently, new supervisors are promoted without any training and maybe within the first year they receive minimal training on what the tasks are, but not how to be a supervisor. Part of the reason for this is that with high turnover, the training academy may be focused on orienting new officers and less on staff development trainings. This is unfortunate, because poor supervision is a key factor in turnover and effective supervisor skills are vastly different from traditional correctional officer skills. In one study, it was the number one reason COs reported for resigning.²⁵ Training new supervisors in leadership skills will go a long way to improving supervision in the institution, and with it, transforming the work culture making it a more appealing organization to potential recruits.

Emotional intelligence is especially important for supervisors. A 2017 study found that “small increases in leader emotional intelligence correlated with significant increases in the job satisfaction of prison employees.” And went on to state, “If correctional leaders want to retain qualified staff, increasing the leaders’ levels of emotional intelligence through training and hiring practices can help accomplish this goal.”²⁶ One quality of emotional intelligence is the amount of care the supervisor shows for their staff. A 2010 report states that, “Employees who reported higher levels of care from immediate supervisors had higher levels of job satisfaction.”²⁷ In that report, care is defined as “interest in one’s life outside the scope of work. This would include such things as asking questions about family, activities outside of work and general concern for overall employee well-being.”²⁸ This may be counter to many current prison cultures where staff getting together outside work is discouraged for fear of over-familiarization and where last names and titles are used, which depersonalizes relationships.

Addressing the Cause, Not Just the Symptom

High levels of staff turnover are destructive to staff cohesion, not to mention the negative impact on security and the rehabilitation of inmates. As veterans leave, our staff become less and less experienced, which can increase turnover and it becomes a vicious downward spiral. As the labor recruiting pool becomes smaller and smaller, some systems lower their hiring standards out of necessity. Many agencies have attempted to improve retention by improving morale. What is important, as stated in the 2017 National Institute of Corrections’ “Resource Guide for Newly

Appointed Wardens,” is to be aware if you are addressing a symptom or the cause. “For example, if an agency is plagued by low morale, throwing parties or implementing other initiatives designed to “cheer people up” is unlikely to be successful without addressing the reasons that morale is so poor.”²⁹ On April 8, 2019, the New York City Department of Correction opened its George Motchan Wellness Center for staff, which provides a gym, counseling services, meditation and religious worship.³⁰ This is excellent for those who utilize it, but it only addresses the symptom – stress. It does not address the cause of the stress. It is not a systemic solution, one that addresses the work culture and relationships among staff.

The only way to create systemic change is to change attitudes, which can best be accomplished through the training academy; policies alone will not do it. Policies are a necessary but insufficient component of an effective culture change effort. Policies will create top-down conditions, but the engine for change must come from the staff themselves and that can only be accomplished through staff development training, including orientation, inservice and supervisor trainings. Currently, far too many training academies are focused on filling positions rather than developing staff. To change this, more funds need to be allocated to the training academy to allow it to expand its training options in order to focus on staff needs.

What employees state they want is a good work/life balance, trust, feeling valued and appreciated, decision-making authority, a good relationship with the boss and meaningful work [career development opportunities].^{31,32} Frequently agencies see increasing wages and benefits as the answer to low staff morale. The mindset of administration is that employees rank good wages as their top expectation, while employees do not rank it in the top five items of value. A fair compensation plan is important, but it does little to improve retention.³³ “The lure of money is powerful. But once employees are making relatively competitive wages, the intrinsic drive to feel needed, valued, and appreciated become a stronger motivator.”³⁴ Agencies that do the best job of retention nurture a cohesive, family-oriented culture that maintains a steadfast commitment to the organization and to each other, like a family with a heartfelt

dedication to the best interests of each member.³⁵ Increasing wages may be a useful component in improving recruitment, but to improve staff retention, the training academy would be a better investment.³⁶ However, more money alone will not bring the desired results without changing the content and style of training.

The Training Academy is Key

The role of the training academy in corrections needs to change in order for it to have the desired impact. Currently, “the long-held tradition of [veteran staff] telling new employees to forget everything they learned in training and pay attention to how it is really done here” undermines the credibility of the training academy and any attempts to make improvements.³⁷ One way to decrease this gap between training and custody is to improve the value of training to existing staff. One annual refresher [often redundant] training is not enough and must be revised and augmented with skill building and career development training opportunities that staff have reported desiring. One study reported that the lack of career development was the most influential reasons for employees resigning.³⁸ Another important step in decreasing the gap is revising and expanding orientation training from a focus on position replacement to career oriented training with an

emphasis on not just the tasks of the job, but how to do the job effectively, i.e., using emotional intelligence skills.

Research strongly states that factors related to emotional intelligence are hugely important,^{39,40} but we have largely ignored this as a focus in our staff training. Within the first year of employment, 25% of staff are assaulted by inmates and after 5 years only 3% are.⁴¹ What staff learn with experience is the psychological skills to do the job effectively. Providing these skills in orientation would have a significant impact on staff retention and safety. However, it may seem necessary to onboard new staff as quickly as possible due to staff shortages, but if this is all you do, it is a myopic strategy that will not improve staffing.

In a 2018 article on “Creating a Correctional Officer Academy” in Federal Probation, it recommends basic orientation needs to be at least 300 hours.⁴² [Note: the article doesn’t mention soft skills, emotional intelligence, teambuilding or work culture, which would likely add more hours.] Of the 44 state training academies surveyed, only 12 [27%] met that 300 hour threshold. An equal number had less than 200 hours.⁴³ By comparison, South Africa trains new recruits for 1056 hours. Increasing the length of orientation will allow new important subjects to be covered without compromising existing content areas. If we also revise our teaching style to one that is engaging, empowering and sometimes fun, we will be on the right path.

TACT Training Building Blocks One and Two

In terms of content, training staff in emotional intelligence is not at all impossible and can be accomplished in as little as two or three days. There are models that have proven very effective, one of which is the Teambuilding Attitude Conflict Transformation [TACT] training. We must

remember however, that emotional intelligence is less about specific skills and more about attitude; so a new way of teaching must be incorporated. The TACT training model is based on certain building blocks that facilitate this process. A foundation of affirmation, respect and caring

must be established in the first session. This can be accomplished by engaging participants in experiential interpersonal exercises and not by lecture. The participants need to feel the trainer respects and cares about them as a group and individually and is not just “doing their job.” With this foundation, the participants will feel a sense of safety built on trust, connection and community; which is the second building block. This sense of safety is critically important for many reasons. Participants will comfortably let their barriers down and be more open to seeing themselves honestly, be more open to new ideas and information without being defensive, and connect with others in a positive, reinforcing community with a strong bond. This connection crosses department boundaries improving cooperation and collaboration. Individuals now feel connected and relationships that have been conflicted often are repaired.

The Importance of Connection

The sense of connection to others is one of our basic human needs.⁴⁴ A frequent and undesirable consequence of working in the field of corrections is developing a feeling of disconnection from self and others. The high divorce rate is indicative of staff being disconnected from their partners because of not feeling comfortable sharing with them what happens at work every day and also bringing their “work attitude” home. The feeling that others in the community do not understand

corrections and may not even respect the profession, only adds to the feeling of isolation and disconnection. Finally, the highly stressed environment of prison and the “us vs. them” culture encourages staff to disconnect from their own emotions so they can be “professional.” The high rates of PTSD, depression, suicide, addiction and absenteeism⁴⁵ all have in common a feeling of isolation or not being connected to others. There may also be a significant problem with moral injury, which can be misdiagnosed as PTSD [31% of security staff]⁴⁶ or depression [30% of all staff]⁴⁷. Although it has not been researched in corrections, the military has researched it and found it is a significant contributor to suicide⁴⁸. Psychologically, this chronic stress and disconnection cause decreases in the immune system, emotional management [pre-frontal cortex], empathy, memory and in cognitive processing.⁴⁹

TACT Training Building Blocks Three, Four and Five

Once a sense of safety, connection and community has been created in the training [the second building block], the skills of effective communication and cooperation must be taught, which will give staff the sense of hope that the working culture can actually be changed. This sense of hope is absolutely necessary in order for old established behavioral patterns to change.⁵⁰ These skills, which are taught experientially, include listening, assertiveness, problem solving and conflict transformation [resolution and prevention]. These emotional intelligence skills are the third building block of the training. Now that the participants have the tools and have actually experienced the change in culture within the training itself, they will naturally feel empowered and a sense of personal responsibility to make changes in their work setting; which is the fourth building block. Surely, they cannot change the work culture in the entire prison, but they certainly can with those whom they work and when enough staff experience this attitude change, work culture transformation gradually takes place. This process is organic, even with staff who come to this type of training skeptical or even defiant to change. The result of this process is the fifth building block, which is personal transformation. Now staff have the attitude, experience and skills necessary to transform the work culture in the prison. This personal transformation is not temporary as indicated by the Philadelphia Prison System where six months post training, 82%-85% of staff reported using the skills⁵¹ compared with traditional teaching strategies showing a 10%-30% rate.⁵²

TACT Training Results

The results of this type of training are remarkable when incorporated in basic orientation and inservice training. Because the intention of this training model is to change attitudes, the impact on staff has been dramatic at work with co-workers, supervisors and inmates and in their personal lives, especially at home. The TACT training methodology above has been serving correctional agencies for over 25 years. TACT trainings have helped rebuild an emotionally devastated staff after four staff were brutally murdered by inmates in 2017, healed damaged relationships between departments, transformed and revitalized a dysfunctional training academy, turn an anger prone problem employee into an employee of the year, improved the working cultures in numerous prisons, re-energized a burned-out 18-year employee, transformed a problem supervisor and reduced employee grievances in one prison to an all-time low.

Some typical comments from staff are:

*“This training was life altering. Best I have ever had in my 25 years with the state;” “Not only equipped me to be a better manager, but also a better person;” “I now know how to deal with problems in a different way than I learned in the past;” “I learned to trust when I didn’t think I could;” “Life transforming. I will carry this training for the rest of my career;” “I ask why? Why did this training take twenty-eight to come into play with the department.” **From the director of a training academy,** “Words cannot express the value of the training you have conducted at the Academy. There is actually a paradigm shift from the rigidity and inflexibility ingrained in Corrections, to the understanding and acceptance of the value of community and teamwork.⁵³ **And from a warden,** “It is generally thought to be the best training program that staff has participated in. the labor unions are strong supporters of it and employee grievances have dropped to an all time low. Thank you for helping us change the culture. It is the best investment of resources that we have ever made.”⁵⁴*

Summary

This type of training model is actually an emotional intelligence inoculation and can be easily learned by staff. It can literally raise the EQ of an agency, department or organization. It is what is missing in corrections and an antidote for the current staffing shortages. It needs to be part of an overall strategy incorporating policy changes empowering staff to improve themselves, their work performance, their teamwork and the overall culture of the prison. We must address the needs of staff, focus on their wellbeing, or we will lose the most valuable asset we have – our employees – and the training academy must be a central player in this process. The training academy is the vehicle by which the desired transformation can occur, and by incorporating emotional intelligence training in its courses, it will greatly enhance its efforts. We need to focus on both the needs of the prison and the needs of staff, not just the needs of the prison. In the short run, they may differ, but in the long run, they are the same.

- ¹ These are consistent responses from staff told to the author in over 25 years of staff development trainings.
- ² Nink, Carl. “Correctional Officers: Strategies to Improve Retention.” Page 5. MTC Institute 2010
- ³ Goleman, Daniel. “Emotional Intelligence.” Bantam Dell 2006
- ⁴ Rand Corporation. “Building a High-Quality Correctional Workforce.” Pg.1. National Institute of Justice; the Priority Criminal Justice Needs Initiative. 2018
- ⁵ Post, Gary M. “Police Recruits – Training Tomorrows Workforce.” FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, March 1992. Pg.19
- ⁶ Williams, Wendy D. “Process Evaluation of the Basic Training Program at a State Corrections Academy in the Southeast.” Dissertation, Nova Southeastern University 2013. Pg. 75
- ⁷ Stinchcomb, Jeanne B, and McCampbell, Susan W. “Focused Leadership: A Resource Guide for Newly Appointed Wardens.” National Institute of Corrections 2017. Pg. 77
- ⁸ Baby Boomers [1943-1964] are team-players, desire self-fulfillment and meaningful lives; focus on career development. Generation Xers [1965-1980] are self-reliant seek balanced personal/professional life, see work more as a job than a career and are mobile, flexible and technologically savvy. Focus on empowering them and give them independence avoiding strong management approach. Generation Y or Millennials [1981-2000] are loyal to family, friends, coworkers, themselves and then their job. Encourage and use their techno-knowledge, be a role model, allow flexibility and provide mentoring and coaching.
- ⁹ Williams, Wendy D. Pg. 71

- ¹⁰ Williams, Wendy D. Pg. 73
- ¹¹ Williams, Wendy D. Pg. 75
- ¹² Burton, Alexander L., et al. "Creating a Model Correctional Officer Training Academy: Implications from a National Survey." *Federal Probation; a Journal of Correctional Philosophy and Practice*, June 2018. Pg.29
- ¹³ Stinchcomb, Jeanne B, and McCampbell, Susan W. Pg. 47
- ¹⁴ Rand Corporation. Pg. 1
- ¹⁵ Barton, Alexander L. et al. Pg. 32
- ¹⁶ Clark, Steve, et.al. "Addressing Personnel Shortages and Low Retention Rates in the Maryland Division of Corrections." *Governor's Summer Internship Program 2018*. Pg.1
- ¹⁷ Barton, Alexander L. et al. Pg.34
- ¹⁸ Ibid
- ¹⁹ Personal correspondence from Dr. Dawn Addy concerning Everglades Correctional Institution, Florida.
- ²⁰ Stinchcomb, Jeanne B. et al. "The Future is Now: Recruiting, Retaining, and Developing the 21st Century Workforce." *Center for Innovative Public Policies, Inc.* Pg. 83
- ²¹ Nink, Carl. Pg.5
- ²² Stinchcomb, Jeanne B. et al. Pg.83
- ²³ Ibid. Pg.84
- ²⁴ Stinchcomb, Jeanne B, and McCampbell, Susan W. Pg.60
- ²⁵ Warren Averett, "Recruiting and Retaining Correctional Officers" December 31, 2017. Pg. 107
- ²⁶ Gibson, Emily Suzanne Hodgens. "The Influence of Leader Emotional Intelligence on Employee Job Satisfaction." *Dissertation, Piedmont International University.* 2017 Pg.86
- ²⁷ Nink, Carl. Pg.8
- ²⁸ Nink, Carl. Pg. 7
- ²⁹ Stinchcomb, Jeanne B, and McCampbell, Susan W. Pg.54
- ³⁰ Johnson, Latima, "NYC DOC's employee wellness center is an investment in officer well-being." *CorrectionsOne.com*, May 7, 2019
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- ³² Stinchcomb, Jeanne B. et al. Pg.87
- ³³ Nink, Carl. Pg. 6
- ³⁴ Stinchcomb, Jeanne B. et al. Pg.84
- ³⁵ Ibid. Pg.86
- ³⁶ Nink, Carl. Pg.11
- ³⁷ Stinchcomb, Jeanne B. et al. Pg.83
- ³⁸ Nink, Carl. Pg.6
- ³⁹ Hartman III, Lawrence Andrew. "Employee Morale." *International Foundation for Protection Officers.* May 3, 2003
- ⁴⁰ Barton, Alexander L. et al. Pg.34
- ⁴¹ *Corrections Forum.* "Inmate Violence; NCDOD Survey Examines Violence by Inmates Against Staff." *American Correctional Association*, January/February 2000. Pg.16
- ⁴² Barton, Alexander L. et al. Pg. 33
- ⁴³ Barton, Alexander L. et al. Pg.30
- ⁴⁴ Shuford, John A. "Empowering Staff; The Key to Improving Morale." *Corrections Today*, March/April 2019. Pg. 34

- ⁴⁵ Shuford, John A. "The Missing Link to Reentry; Changing Prison Culture." *Corrections Today*. March/April 2018, Pg. 43
- ⁴⁶ Spinaris, C., & Denhof, M. (2013). Depression, PTSD, and comorbidity in United States corrections professionals: Prevalence and impact on health and functioning. Retrieved from nicic.gov/depression-ptsd-and-comorbidity-unitedstates-corrections-professionals-prevalenceand-impact-health
- ⁴⁷ Ibid
- ⁴⁸ Moral injury is defined as perpetrating, failing to prevent, bearing witness to, or learning about acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations or a generalized sense of falling short of moral and normative standards befitting good persons.
- ⁴⁹ Segal, Elizabeth A., et al. "Assessing Empathy." Columbia University Press 2017. Pg. 53, 91
- ⁵⁰ Guhigg, Charles. "The Power of Habit." Radnom House Trade Paperback 2014. Pg.85
- ⁵¹ Miller, Marsha L. PhD. "Conflict Resolution/Team Building Training for the Philadelphia Prison System; Evaluation Report." March 18, 1998
- ⁵² National Institute of Corrections White Paper, "Learning Organizations." December 2012. Pg.21. NIC Accession Number 026506
- ⁵³ Personal correspondence from Craig Conway, Director New Jersey Training Academy, March 2003.
- ⁵⁴ Personal correspondence from Chris Money, Warden, Marion Correctional Institution, Ohio Department of Corrections, June 2003.

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